

THE APPLEBY VERSION

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John S Gibson, *The Thistle and the Crown. A History of the Scottish Office*, Edinburgh: HMSO, 1985, ISBN 011 4923965

pp. 198, incl. photographs.

In his Foreword to Mr Gibson's informal history of the Scottish Office, its present incumbent, George Younger, allows himself a reference to 'Yes Minister': it will 'no doubt have its equally enjoyable successors'. After reading through this volume, elegantly produced and reasonably priced though it is, I had the uneasy feeling that much of it resembled Sir Humphrey Appleby's *History of the Ministry of Administration*, written in a style whose surface air of consensus may mask something a lot more biting and interesting conveyed in the hidden code of Whitehall.

Hm. A whiff of sour grapes here, Harvie? You looked at the Sources bit and no mention of your book? Tsk, Tsk. But no mention either of James Kellas's *The Scottish Political System*, Michael Keating and Arthur Midwinter's *The Government of Scotland*? Of course, you're all the sort of lads Sir Humphrey would refer to as 'resolute and imaginative' (obsessive axe-grinders) and what Mr Gibson's doing here is projecting the ethos of a much tidier system.

The main problem with Mr Gibson's book stems from its 'insider' provenance. This wouldn't matter – indeed, would be a positive benefit – if it was published in the ordinary commercial way. If Mr Gibson had been able to say 'To hell with the Official Secrets Act' and had told us (within the laws of libel) who really did what, who was brilliant or incompetent or simply drunk most of the time, then he would, like Richard Crossman, be most unpopular. But he would have said something new. You can't however do this when your subject is also your publisher and it is noticeable that, although among historians the Scottish Office has the reputation of turning a blind eye to the 30 year rule, this doesn't seem to have applied to Mr Gibson. No internal document is quoted after World War II. After *The Crown and the Thistle*, St Andrew's House secretiveness remains, if anything, reinforced.

Of course, to expect the Scottish Office to present a highly politicised image is probably entirely wrong. A fly on the Holyrood Palace wall back in July 1985, when George Younger held his centenary dinner for former holders of his office, wouldn't, I think, have heard many abrasive exchanges between the middle-of-the-road Labourites and Conservative wets there assembled. (And the fact that Tory and Labour could sit down to the same meat and drink is remarkable enough these days). The said fly would have had a lot more fun eavesdropping on Walter Elliot and Tom Johnston, two of the most constructive *étatistes* ever to hold office in Britain, let alone Scotland, but would have found it even harder to tell them apart.

This testifies to the persuasiveness and dominance of an administrative ethos which is not only, as Mr Gibson rightly points out, distinctive in Britain but profoundly unBritish. In fact the Scottish Office has evolved into something rather similar to John Stuart Mill's scheme for parliamentary reform, which Bagehot ridiculed in the 1860s. Mill wanted to replace the Cabinet with a salaried commission of civil servants, whose draft legislation would only be subject to a veto by an elected assembly. So while the St. Andrew's House complex has some visual resemblance to the French *Prefecture* and the German *Regierungsprasidium* in being the regional end of the central power (something impossible to find in England in such a concentrated form), the lack of a developed system of British administrative law has left a vacuum into which the Scottish Office has gradually inserted a policy-forming capacity which Europeans would find not only illegitimate but unbelievable.

The Scottish system of government is not only anomalous; it is – as both Hanham and Kellas pointed out – increasingly unstable. They were already worried in the late 1960s that the tendency of decisions to be taken in Edinburgh wasn't being matched by any mechanism to secure consent. This complaint, Mr Gibson suggests, was partly met by the policy of 'disengagement' after the new local government structure was set up in 1974, but he has to admit that after 1979 this has given way to an unprecedented degree of intervention. The office set up in 1885 to give some semblance of Scottish control over Scottish legislation has now, ironically, become the instrument of imposing an ideology sanctioned by only a small minority of the Scottish electorate.

That, at various critical points in the last century, the Scottish Office reflected (and in part constructed) a 'Scottish mind' on important legislation is incontestable: on land reform in the 1910s, industrial diversification in the 1930s, electrical power and education in the 1940s,

social work in the 1960s, industry again in the 1970s. The record may be patchy – something, I suspect, to do with the rather dubious status of the ‘interests’ deemed to add up to the ‘Scottish mind’ – but, compared with the alternatives to state action, it isn’t bad. If it’s the Office’s constraints which have kept George Younger on the semi-collectivist straight and narrow, then he ought to be grateful for anything which distinguishes him from Mrs Thatcher’s *incroyables*.

Mr Gibson tells some good stories, and keeps quiet about some others. I’ve always been intrigued by the fact that Hector McNeil had Guy Burgess as his private secretary at the Foreign Office, and got George Pottinger when he moved to the Scottish Office in 1950. My hunch is that the Burgess business put McNeil under a cloud just when he could have consolidated some of Arthur Woodburn’s tentative gains in devolution – such as tightening up the Scottish Economic Conference, which instead he abolished. Of the extraordinary Pottinger business, which certainly added its quota to the devolution agitation, we don’t hear a word – though who better to write about it than the biographer of Deacon Brodie?

Grim, ghastly, prison-like, horrible: the one piece of emotion Mr Gibson allows himself is about New St Andrew’s House. George Younger joins him in execrating this elephant’s backside of a building. Indeed they go on about it so much that one closes the book, wondering... Scotland was the country of John Ruskin, who unerringly deduced bad politics from bad architecture. Is this another code, and are they trying to tell us something?

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